

Recording under Pandemic Conditions: Opportunities and Challenges

Interview with Frieder Bernius, Director of the Stuttgart Chamberchoir, Germany

Dear Mr Bernius, the other day your latest CD, "The Seven Last Words of our Saviour on the Cross" by Joseph Haydn was released under the Carus label. This recording was made in March 2021 under very strict hygienic conditions. What were those actually at the time?

The conditions were: minimum distance of 1.5 metres between all the performers, but we were allowed to sing and play without masks.

What use can be made of the space when an orchestra and a choir, never mind also four soloists, are supposed to make music together? Is it really possible to make music together when the most distant fellow fighters are more than 50 metres apart and the conductor is always turning his back to somebody, because the musicians have been placed at an angle far greater than 180 degrees?

The most important artistic aim of a joint project involving choir, soloists and orchestra is to create something together and, while doing so, to be able to listen to each other. As the conductor, supposed to keep all that together through his gestures and – during the rehearsal – verbally, I need to be visible to all. It was exactly those expectations that were seriously impeded by the conditions. Because of the limited possibilities to hear each other, the conductor's suggestions could not, as otherwise, be checked and refined. And in order to be visible to the largest number of participants, I had to stand at the side (see photo) and therefore was not able to have the familiar listening distances to the participants. My field of vision, from the side to the leader of the orchestra,

meant that parts of the orchestra sat behind me and thus could only see the leader. it was only in the instrumental introductions (read: without the solo singers and the choir) that I could take my usual position in front of the orchestra.



© Musik Podium Stuttgart

Which (further) challenges became apparent during this recording?

Because of these pre-conditions the sound engineer was even more responsible for a successful recording than usual. For me as a conductor it is always important to think ahead musically and at the same time to be able to hear the result afterwards. This listening in one's mind afterwards became very difficult. On top of all that, a burden on time was provided by the fact that the results of the recordings had to be checked in the studio more often than normally.

Did this unusual positioning of the musicians also provide positive factors, compared to the normal set-up?

What is the best possible arrangement for a recording

involving choir, soloists and orchestra? In the 1980s we experimented in this respect e.g. by using an “en face” set-up, with choir and orchestra facing each other, in which case the conductor can – as under Corona conditions – only stand at the side. This allowed the microphones to be focussed exceptionally well onto the various sub-groups of musicians but had the disadvantages for the conductor which I have already mentioned. The usual practice of placing the choir behind the orchestra has the disadvantage that the microphones are unable to record the sub-groups separately and thus, when it comes to editing, their sounds cannot be isolated well enough from each other that the balance between them might be changed.



© Musik Podium Stuttgart

How did post-production go?

Same as the more difficult conditions generally: more

complicated and more time-consuming than usual, because of a few surprises that became apparent only when the takes were listened to really carefully, and because of the need for larger technical support in order to mix all the sub-groups, which because of the unfamiliar distances sounded different on the tapes from the way they had in the hall.

If today, roughly six months after the finalisation of the master, you listen to the recording yet again, do you in a way hear the unorthodox positioning of the performers?

If that were the case we should not have risked making the recording under those difficult conditions, for nobody will still remember in 20, 30 years under what unusual preconditions it was created.

The most important pre-condition of all music-making in groups is the ability to hear one another well. And being able to make recordings and, in the process, gaining important experience, is, for me, an important link between rehearsals and concerts. More difficult conditions will always lead to less pleasing outcomes, something that can only be evened out by an overdose of commitment by all those involved!

Might you repeat some features of this unusual seating plan for future recordings?

No. Let us hope we will never again have to record under these conditions!

Joseph Haydn

Die Sieben letzten Worte unseres Erlösers am Kreuze

Kammerchor Stuttgart

Hofkapelle Stuttgart

Anna-Lena Elbert, Sopran

Sophie Harmsen, Alt

Florian Sievers, Tenor

Sebastian Noack, Bass

Frieder Bernius

Carus 83.520



© Musik Podium Stuttgart

Translated by Irene Auerbach, UK